

QUAMBATOOK

A new Australian musical based on the songs and stories of John Williamson is premiering at Penrith in February.

For most of us, Quambatook is a mythical place that resides in the head of John Williamson. It hasn't changed in 50 years. Without ever having been there, anyone who has been to one of his concerts knows intimate details about the place and what it was like as the young John was growing up.

Now, Quambatook is the title of a musical starring Darren Coggan (*Grease, Shout*) and Belinda Wollaston (currently touring Australia in *Respect*).

No longer content to regale us with occasional stories from the stage, John has enlisted the abundant skills of playwright, Simon Heath to create an entire musical around his native mallee town, using the wonderful Williamson stories and songs.

Simon has managed to synthesize John's DNA into a rollicking, unforgettable narrative that begins in the hilarious family home then goes on a provocative journey to Uluru. Throughout, the cast burst into classic Williamson songs.

"I guess one of the differences about *Quambatook*," says John, "is that we have used songs that have already proved to be popular. Musicals usually take the risk of making hits after the show is released."

For 20 years John has dreamed of creating a truly Australian musical that all the family could enjoy. He's tinkered with ideas himself but hasn't been able to bring it off til now.

Simon Heath, a proud Aussie from Bourke in outback NSW, recently returned from 30 years working in the US on musicals and tv. He shut himself away one weekend with all of John's albums and played them over and over until he had the songs he wanted. Then he pestered John to tell him everything – from his childhood through to his hopes for other kids' childhoods.

Which is how the story ended up at Uluru. John reckons schools should take every Aussie kid there at age 10 or 11. Just to soak in the atmosphere of our spiritual centre. Just to experience the outback.

And, of course, there's an emu in the story. But this one isn't running the pants off a kangaroo. It gets to put the wind up dad every time it arrives with a new bouncing baby boy for the family.

For John the biggest thrill about *Quambatook, the Musical* is as a songwriter. "It is an amazing experience to hear new interpretations of my music."

Some of the words have been changed to suit the show and he has written a new song called *The Joy is in the Journey* to be performed by Belinda.

The Australian folk musical – *John Williamson's Quambatook* takes us back to a time that few remember – which is probably just as well because so much of it is made up. It is 1955 in a small country town. There's a boy with big ambitions. His parents and brothers. A Silver Haired Showman. A hostie in love with the pilot. And that bloody emu.

What more could you want from a truly Australian musical?

World Premiere: Evan Theatre Thursday 7 February 2008

For tickets call Penrith Panthers on 1800 061 991